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FOREST RECREATION

Charting The Future Of Outdoor Recreation

Modern events have taken man at headlong pace from beautiful forest glens, meadows, streams, and waterfalls, to sprawling cities, tenements, and tops of skyscrapers. Coming full circle, man's present drive is back to the environment at the edge of the city.

But in escaping to the edges of megalopolis in search of an environment better suited to his physical and intellectual well-being, modern man often only again encounters an extension of the city. He breathes the stench of polluted rivers; confronts the unsightliness of litter; and meets the foul air blown from the city.

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Hoping to preserve both the quality and character of man's encounter with his environment, USDA Forest Service recreation researchers, headed by Dr. Elwood L. Shafer, Jr., have engaged in studies of recreation trends and recreation goals. Their work is done at the New York State University College of Forestry at Syracuse University.

One study recently traced several patterns of human behavior in man's search for rest, relaxation, and recreation in an outdoor environment. The researchers observed that, although urban and rural spots attract different kinds of people, behavior patterns at city parks reveal certain principles that also apply to behavior patterns at forest recreation areas.

Philadelphia's city parks, described by June Jacobs in her book Death and Life of Great American Cities, provided a basis for their experiment. When William Penn designed Philadelphia in the seventeenth century, he included four residential squares, each equidistant from City Hall, the original geographic center of the City. The best known of Penn's four squares is Rittenhouse Square. It is a popular park and one of Philadelphia's greatest assets today. The others are Washington Square, the Center of an office and high rise apartment area; and Franklin Square, the City's skid row park where the homeless and unemployed gather amid flophouses, eateries, and huge parking lots. The fourth of Penn's squares has been squeezed into a small traffic island, Logan Circle in Benjamin Franklin Parkway.

According to behavior analysis, Philadelphia's Rittenhouse Square, with its heterogeneous mixture of residential and business structures, produces a variety of park users who enter and leave the park at different times. Users consist of early-bird walkers, mothers and children from nearby apartments, shoppers, office employees on lunch hours, school children after school, or strolling couples in the evening. By contrast, Washington Square, rimmed entirely by office buildings and high rise apartments, attracts mostly office workers on lunch hours, while Franklin Square, the skid row park, is continuously filled by a very homogeneous group of users with total leisure.

In their study, Dr. Shafer's researchers found behavioral similarities in the water-recreation use patterns in a forest environment. A lake surrounded only by youth camps may be used but a few hours of the day by user groups with the same schedules, much like Philadelphia's Washington Square. But, surround the same lake with social and economical recreation diversity -- such as youth camps, state campgrounds, boat marinas, water skiing schools, public swimming beaches, boat rides for tourists, and private summer cottages -- resulting in people with different water-recreation interests and schedules -- and you have a lake used continuously throughout the day, like Rittenhouse Square. Further, dominate the lake's shoreline with activites not related to forest recreation and eventually the lake may become a slum recreation area, much like Franklin Square.

According to Shafer, the ability of some parks to stimulate use or disuse may have little or nothing to do with the incomes or

occupations of a district's population. The overwhelming diversity of users in New York City's Washington Square illustrates this point. Because of its design -- a centrally-located sunken, concrete, circular, water-filled basin surrounded by shade trees and paved walks all leading to the basin's edge -- this park is virtually a "medieval theater-in-the-round". Yet, it is impossible to separate players and audience. Activities here involve people taking pictures, strangers debating civil rights, children playing under the arched park entrance, small crowds listening to "Jamaica Farewell" being played on metal drums, tourists, and absorbed writers and readers -- all in the center of activity and not for lack of choice, because empty benches along the fringes of the park afford quiet and solitude.

The image of Washington Square lingers in a study of leisure behavior at Fish Creek in the Adirondacks. Rather than a circular water-filled basin, the activity center at Fish Creek is a lake completely surrounded by individual tent and trailer sites. The sites are close to one another and the lake's shore, so that from almost any spot one can observe the activities of others around the lake and within the campground. Campers like it that way; many enjoy being able to see others and to have others see them. Campers with boats often cruise close to shore so that they can be observed by strangers on the shore. Some campers just stroll from site to site and chat with others. Still others prefer just to sit and simply observe the activities throughout the campground or at the bathing beach.

Because of its unique design and heterogeneous mix of outdoor recreation facilities and attractions, Fish Creek campground attracts a diversified, but committed group of patrons. Here is a recreation theater-in-the-round that is larger than New York's Washington Square. But users have similar basic behavior patterns in both places.

Ghetto & Suburbs Determine Recreation Use

Recreation trends are compiled from the entire range of recreation users. At first glance, the ghetto might not seem to be of direct concern to outdoor recreation managers and researchers, for whom "recreation" and "rural" might seem synonymous. However, the people of the inner city life exert a very significant influence on the total outdoor recreation demand system. For example, travel experts say that the fear of riots, coupled with the rising cost of living, are causing many families to bypass urban centers as vacation spots, and to seek rural spots instead.

Suburbs are also a major determinant of outdoor recreation trends. Although on Friday evenings throughout the year, suburbanites can rush to forest and beach environments, their daily demand for suburban outdoor recreation is not entirely met. Local parks within easy walking distance of home are usually not developed in suburbia. And the few parks that do exist in wealthy neighborhoods are usually overcrowed.

Generally, in both cities and suburbs, financial guardians are distressed by the agonies of managing welfare, traffic, and schools. Consequently, recreation takes low priority, so that space for recreation is steadily losing grounds. Overcrowding results.

There is similar overcrowding on public forested lands. Public day-use recreation areas within a four-hour drive from megalopolis are used so intensively -- mostly on week-ends -- that many people consider it worthwhile to invest in their own private summer homes, beach clubs, boat marinas, hunting and fishing preserves, riding clubs, or picnic grounds.

Because this new emphasis upon private recreation facilities is hastening the withdrawal of private land from public entry, many timber companies are beginning to open their private lands to public use. As of 1960, 65 of the major lumber companies had established 132 public parks on private lands. The number of these facilities has increased since and is expected to continue to multiply.

Man-Made Litter Disturbs Recreation Sites

Increased recreation use of forested lands means increased problems for the forest. Finding a cherished waterfall, tall and majestic, with a cool mist spraying from its plunging pool, and trout darting in the protective depths of its base, makes one feel that megalopolis is far, far away. But, lo! There, just beneath the water at a shallow edge of the pool, lie rusty, discarded cans -- traces of man-made litter, little different from the litter of a center-city park. Suddenly the waterfall loses some of its natural attractiveness.

Because of his conditioned response to daily life in megalopolis, will man eventually destroy the forest's intrinsic values that he needs for rest, relaxation, recreation, and survival -- just as he has polluted the air and water around his cities? Will he turn all his beautiful forest glens, meadows, streams, and waterfalls into extensions of the city?

If resource managers accept the challenge to understand the total outdoor recreation phenomenon as part of a larger man-resource system and to meet the resulting management problems head-on now, they will both be able to preserve landscape beauty for future generations and to meet the demands for today's beauty.

What is needed is a "systems approach", a computer analysis of everything that a recreation region, the Northeast for example, takes in (people, money, and time spent in various activities), and everything that a recreation region gives out (direct and indirect social and economic benefits).

Foresight -- the opportunity to look ahead and to match supply to demand instead of patching up too little too late -- is much in need. Forest Service recreation researchers are at work, hopeful of helping align today's recreation trends with tomorrow's recreation goals.